

# TENSIONS IN MANAGING HUMAN RESOURCES: INTRODUCING A PARADOX FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH AGENDA

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*“...the theoretical position that embraces the notion of tensions or paradoxes or dilemmas seems to be the most accurate reflection of the lived experience of HR professionals” (Stiles & Trevor, 2006: 62)*

## Introduction

Of all areas of management and organization science, one cannot imagine an area where tensions are more evident than in Human Resource Management. Paauwe holds “[w]e are finding increasing evidence of the dualities and paradoxes entailed in HRM today” (Paauwe, 2004: 40). Notwithstanding, HRM researchers have not extensively mobilized paradox theory to understand tensions. Also, paradox theorists – who study a wide range of management issues such as leadership (Manz, Anand, Joshi, & Manz, 2008; Zhang, Waldman, Han, & Li, 2015), strategic decision-making (Smith, 2014), innovation (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009) and managerial decision-making (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) – have engaged little with HRM (for exceptions see Aust, Brandl, & Keegan, 2015; Ehnert, 2009; Kozica & Brandl, 2015). In this chapter, we examine previous research on tensions in HRM, focusing on the contributions and limitations of these perspectives for understanding and handling tensions. Second, we focus on what characterizes the dynamics of coping with tensions. Here, we draw on paradox theory to consider conditions for alternative response/coping strategies and processes that characterize reinforcing cycles. We offer insights from the (limited) body of work in HRM that draws on paradox theory. Thirdly, we offer a paradox framework to aid the study of HRM tensions. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for further HRM research on tensions and coping responses enriched by insights from a paradox perspective.

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## **Tensions in HRM - Sources**

For Watson (2010), tensions in HRM systems are nothing new (e.g., Legge, 1978; Watson, 1977) but are linked with the core purpose of HRM which is the managerial utilization of human efforts, knowledge, capabilities and committed behaviors in the context of the employment relationship, i.e., “the connection between employees and employers through which individuals sell their labor” (Budd & Bhawe, 2008: 51). This exchange *can* enable “the enterprise to continue into the future” (Watson, 2010: 919) but is also fraught with uncertainty inherent to employment relationships where “employers compete for employees while... employees seek to maximize their opportunities and rewards from employers. But, *simultaneously*, employers are competing with others in product and service markets, and are under pressure to minimize labour costs in order to sustain and improve profits or other benefits.” (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010: 802, emphasis added). Based on these realities of capitalist economic relations, some theorists doubt if tensions between the interests of employers and employees can ever be managed for mutually beneficial partnerships (Dobbins & Dundon, 2015). Others see the diverse interests inherent in the employment relationship as spurring both cooperation and conflict at work (Bélanger & Edwards, 2013; Godard, 2004) and where HRM tensions are common though not necessarily negative. Research also, at least implicitly, suggests that HRM tensions persist over time, often having no ‘solutions’. This implies considerable challenges for those coping with tensions, particularly HRM practitioners who are often not very powerful within the organization (Caldwell, 2003) which makes the task of handling tensions even more difficult (Legge, 1978; Woodrow & Guest, 2014). Despite the apparent importance of tensions to understanding HRM systems, indepth study of how actors cope with and respond to tensions lags compared to other areas of management theory. Before discussing how this lag may be addressed, we first examine prior research on HRM tensions, contrasting two prominent positions in the literature - pluralist Strategic SHRM (pSHRM) and critical HRM (cHRM).

## **Coping with HRM Tensions**

The discussion of tensions in HRM systems has mainly taken place in two broad streams of literature in the field. These are pluralist Strategic Human Resource Management (hereafter pSHRM) and critical Human Resource Management (hereafter cHRM). Both perspectives acknowledge the existence of tensions, however, the analysis of sources of these tensions, about their (non-)paradoxical nature and about how to handle them vary considerably.

**The pSHRM perspective on coping with tensions.** pSHRM researchers acknowledge the existence of tensions and view these primarily as a potential threat to performance and competitive advantage (Boselie, 2009, 2014; Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Paauwe, 2007). Tensions are seen to arise due to different simultaneous HRM-related managerial goals and managerial roles. In the context of his model of HR business partners, Ulrich (1997) argues that “[s]uccess in the multiple-role framework requires that HR professionals *balance the tension* inherent in being a strategic partner on the one hand and an employee champion on the other” (Ulrich, 1997: 45, emphasis added). Others cite tensions between cost-effectiveness versus social legitimacy (Boxall & Purcell, 2016) and economic values versus moral values (Mueller & Carter, 2005; Paauwe, 2004, 2009). Boxall and Purcell (2016) for example identify contradictory economic and social goals that managers must resolve to ensure viability and achieve differentiation. These include cost effectiveness, social legitimacy and flexibility. Boselie (2009) also identifies diverse HRM related managerial goals and holds that pursuing social legitimacy without adequate financial or operational performance, as is the case in some public sector organizations such as the National Health Service in the UK (Bach, 2004), can threaten organizational survival; conversely, pursuing financial performance without achieving minimally sufficient levels of social legitimacy can lead to difficulties recruiting employees and even corporate scandals (Boselie, 2009: 95). In the pSHRM perspective, tensions encountered between managements’ HRM related goals must therefore be resolved because “in the most severe cases of conflict over these tensions, firms experience ‘motivational crises’ which

depress productivity and profitability, and can threaten their viability” (Boxall & Purcell, 2007: 95). Boon, Paauwe, Boselie and Hartog, (2009: 492) hold that “HRM tensions are strategic tensions that managers must respond to... [o]rganizations *balance* between the degree of conformity and the degree of differentiation from competitors regarding HRM.” (emphasis added).

The pSHRM view on tensions is embedded in a managerial perspective where theorists combine institutional theory with the resource based view (RBV) to describe HRM systems (Boselie, 2009) that accommodate tensions between competing pressures. Responses to HRM tensions are framed by “a more sophisticated approach to contingency theory” (Boxall & Purcell, 2000: 188) where tensions are resolved by managerial design (Evans, 1999: 333). To be successful in the long run according to the “strategic balance perspective” advocated by Boselie means “the more HR fit the better” (2014: 21).

Managers can cope with tensions through strategies of fit and align between different internal and external contingencies. For example, they can achieve an “optimal level of conforming” (Boon et al., 2009: 505) to institutional pressures and differentiation from competitors. Fit, including institutional fit, is a critical issue in how pSHRM researchers view the resolution of tensions. Some focus on consistency with key internal and external systems (Boon et al., 2009; Boselie, 2014) while other theorists mainly focus on external fit (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). Responses to tensions from multiple demands consequently go beyond approaches that choose a one-dimensional fit as in earlier contingency HRM models (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988; Schuler & Jackson, 1987), but non-fit oriented solutions to tensions in the pSHRM literature are rare.

One notable exception in the SHRM field to conceptualization of tensions – and their handling – is ‘duality theory’ proposed by Evans and colleagues (Evans, 1999; Evans & Doz, 1989; Evans & Genadry, 1999). They offer an alternative lens highlighting “the oppositions of duality” (Evans, 1999: 333) and eschewing fit/alignment models for resolving tensions. Evans

and Génadry (1999) hold that “[e]mphasis on fit leads to a design optic where change is a variable outside the field of view. With its focus on tension, the duality optic focuses on development processes” (Evans & Genadry, 1999: 392). Evan’s duality thinking can be interpreted as an early attempt to shift theorizing on HRM tensions towards a dynamic Paradox HRM perspective (see also Chung, Bozkurt, & Sparrow, 2011; Ehnert, 2009; Guerci & Carollo, 2016). Notwithstanding, the endorsement of (a more sophisticated) contingency theory remains the key basis for arguing how organizations should cope with HRM tensions that threaten competitive performance and viability.

This dominant fit approach to coping with tensions has limitations. It downplays the dynamic facets of HRM tensions emerging from continuously changing formal arrangements outside organizations (e.g., employment legislation) and from informal accommodations within specific workplaces for coping with disintegrative forces (Watson, 2012). The postulate to minimize or avoid tensions implicit in some pSHRM work also ignores the potential for tensions to spur innovation and change by developing more ethical, human-centred HRM systems where fairness, work-life balance and health-related well-being are core concerns in and of themselves (Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Ehnert, 2009). While alignment and fit are offered as key solutions to tensions, what these entail on a concrete day-to-day basis for HRM practitioners and others is not well-specified. What exactly practitioners can do cognitively and emotionally, or in terms of mindset, attitudes or skills, are issues that remain somewhat vague. Finally fit/alignment strategies suggest tradeoffs between contradictory goals or interests, and either/or thinking on coping with HRM tensions is prevalent in this literature.

**cHRM perspective on coping with tensions.** cHRM researchers view tensions as rooted in the employment relationship and its embeddedness in global capitalism. Discourses of market individualism and financialization play a key role in decisions on HRM systems that impact negatively on employees in terms of their rights, well-being and ethical treatment (Thompson, 2011). cHRM research is underpinned by an emancipatory ethos where writers

strive to ensure that “the voices of those who tend to be excluded from mainstream analysis are better represented in HRM theory and practice” (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010: 807). Researchers study tensions caused by work intensification in high performance work systems (Ramsay, Scholarios, & Harley, 2000), the shrinking employee champion role in HRM functions (Francis & Keegan, 2006), and the politico-managerial changes associated with globalization (Keenoy, 1999). They highlight the voices excluded in mainstream HRM (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010), and the subjectification of employees in performance management systems (Hoedemaekers & Keegan, 2010; Townley, 1993).

Legge’s (1978) seminal analysis looks at tensions faced by personnel managers constrained by a capitalist context in advancing humane and employee-centred personnel management solutions. She identifies ambiguities facing personnel managers, and vicious cycles associated with their roles. First, lack of power results in the non-involvement of the HR department in the planning of issues relevant to people management. This leads to a series of HR problems (such as inadequately trained staff) that are typically left to the HR department to resolve, forcing HR managers into a reactive stance. The second vicious cycle emerges because HR managers are uncertain about their priorities and therefore welcome being reactive and busy, in turn reinforcing line managers’ negative views of the HR department (Drucker, 1954). The third vicious cycle emerges because the HR department lacks status and has a bad reputation among career-aspiring employees leading to a relative lack of personnel with strategic capacities in HR work reinforcing the lack of authority of HR departments.

Watson (2004; 2010) and Legge (1999) highlight the constraints on managers to freely define or pursue humane HRM goals in organizations, and Watson (2010) urges scholars to go beyond simplified HRM prescriptions for best practices to seek richer contextualized understandings of managerial HRM actions in response to tensions (see also Godard, 2004). cHRM writers also recognize the dynamic instabilities pervading any HRM *solution*. All solutions are seen as containing seeds of their own instability. Solutions premised on accomodating

employee/employer conflicts contain latent tensions due to changing conditions that influence the relative power of employees and employers. A sensitivity to dynamic tensions is evident in cHRM writing rather than grand design solutions premised, for example, on optimal levels of alignment or fit.

As a legacy of the emancipatory drive, “contra-argument,” or deconstructive (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008) modes of cHRM studies (Harley & Hardy, 2004; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009), critical HRM theorists fail to offer practical insights on ways HRM practitioners or other actors (employees, line managers or HR specialists) cope with or work through tensions. cHRM scholars are influenced mainly by Marxist thinking that recognizes contradictions as fostering revolutionary change in society at large, whereby suppressed actors can overcome tensions between principles of autonomy and control (McGovern, 2014). This working assumption has limited the utility of critical HRM writing for understanding responses to tensions within organizations. Similar to the pSHRM perspective, it suggests that tensions can be resolved, albeit through more radical activities. It also overlooks empirical evidence showing that actors are sometimes *able to cope* with tensions and adapt HRM systems so that vicious cycles leading to collapse do not necessarily happen (e.g., Dobbins & Dundon, 2015). The cHRM perspective currently does not offer explicit answers on how actors cope with tensions or use tensions as opportunities for transformation, creativity and change in the context of HRM systems.

### **The Dynamics of Coping with Paradoxical Tensions**

The dominant perspectives in HRM research on tensions neglect a focus on how actors approach and frame paradoxical tensions. Nor do they focus on practical, concrete ways of coping with dynamically evolving paradoxical tensions. Paradoxes are impervious to resolution due to the simultaneous and contradictory nature of relations between elements (Fairhurst et al., 2016). Insight on dynamics of paradoxical tensions, responses, and vicious and virtuous cycles associated with paradoxes and response strategies are needed in the HRM field.

Lewis (2000) holds that organizations and individuals are not automatically victims of tensions and vicious cycles, but that (ongoing) response strategies can positively impact long-term outcomes. In their constitutive perspective on paradox, Putnam, Fairhurst and Banhart (2016) also stress the *praxis* of everyday coping for explaining individual and organizational outcomes from responding to paradoxical tensions. Smith and Lewis (2011) outline conditions for alternative response strategies incorporating both organizational factors (i.e. inertia, dynamic capabilities) and individual factors (i.e. drive for consistency vs. complexity, emotional equanimity). Further, in their review of the organizational literature, Smith and Lewis (2011) distinguish *vicious* and *virtuous* cycles based on how actors frame and respond to tensions. They associate both/and approaches to paradoxes with virtuous cycles, and either/or orientations with vicious cycles. Their model explains how virtuous cycles encourage organizational sustainability.

The paradox lens commends a focus on the ongoing nature of tensions and a dynamic view of coping with and responding to them. Tensions cannot be resolved (Fairhurst et al., 2016), but require iterating responses. For example, oscillating between splitting and integrating strategies over time can achieve transcendence and synthesis. The stance of the paradox lens and the assumption of the permanent and dynamic nature of tensions reminds us that managing is about finding ‘paradoxical coping strategies’ rather than achieving ‘balance’. An organization that manages paradoxical HRM tensions via iterating or alternating responses in a dynamic way may be more viable than one that balances HRM tensions via finding optimal fit.

Recent examples of HRM scholars mobilizing paradox theory to study HRM tensions and responses place emphasis on dynamics and ongoing tensions. An example is research by Kozica and Brandl (2015). In an ethnographic study of performance appraisal systems, they find support for the dynamic processes that characterize responses to paradoxical tensions. They argue that performance rankings, which arrange tensions between individual proliferation and



collegial solidarity, will eventually deteriorate or diminish and need to be reformed by arranging the competing elements in a different way (see also Meyer & Gupta, 1994).

A paradox perspective on HRM tensions could also support a shared understanding in the organization about the *permanency* of the challenge of managing tensions. Models, such as Ulrich's model of the HRM function, do not address how tensions could be handled. Instead, they likely reduce capacity to deal sustainably with tensions by obscuring the simultaneity and contradictory nature of HRM as both strategic and operational, and people and process oriented, having both strategic and employee facing aspects (Gerpott, 2015). Managing tensions cannot be delegated to HRM specialists even if they play an important role in framing tensions and responses. Tensions are also not balanced by frameworks.

### **A Paradox Framework on HRM Tensions**

We now build on previous sections and on recent paradox theory to present a Paradox HRM framework as an aid for systemstically studying HRM tensions. Our framework serves as an illustration to highlight the main features of a paradox HRM perspective: (1) Paradoxical HRM tensions and influences that render them salient; (2) Perspectives on tensions; (3) Responses to tensions; (4) Dynamic outcomes of responses to tensions (see Figure 1).

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**(1) Paradoxical HRM tensions and influences that render them salient.** HRM systems comprise many different paradoxes that are constituted in different contexts. It is impossible to identify all these paradoxes, *ex ante*. However, for the sake of illustration and discussion, we follow Smith and Lewis (2011) and discuss paradoxes of performing, organizing, belonging and learning, as well as their interrelationships at different levels. In industrial capitalist societies employees, managers and broader stakeholders (e.g. families, labor representatives) look to HRM systems for appropriate relations between autonomy and

control. They look for fairness in rewards and opportunities for advancement based on social equality and achievement rather than on class or gender (Watson, 2012). HRM actors are therefore confronted with multiple HRM tensions i.e. simultaneous, contradictory, and interrelated principles that persist over time (1a).

*Performing* paradoxes surface when employees want high wages while employers want to contain labour costs reflecting opposing, simultaneous desired outcomes. Developers of compensation systems face tensions while employees and their representatives may accept or contest the outcomes defined by organizational policy. *Learning* paradoxes arise when employees want to invest in general skills to increase their employment possibilities while employers want to invest mainly in firm specific human capital. Tensions between these aims can also lead to under-utilization of HRM systems when emerging policies are not in line with employees' desires or interests. *Belonging* paradoxes arise when HRM specialists seek to develop HRM systems for employee well-being on the basis of their professional values and perceived duty of care to employees. At the same time HRM specialists increasingly need to respond to business values as strategic partners by developing work systems that produce high levels of work pressure for individuals (Ehrnrooth & Björkman, 2012; Ramsay et al., 2000; Van De Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012). Finally, combinations of *organizing* and *performing* paradoxes emerge when decentralized HR responsibilities are assigned to middle managers but are in opposition to demands for managers to conform with strict HRM rules and regulations when at the same time devolved HRM systems rely on self-directed learning and performing of HR work by managers (Link & Müller, 2015). The question for HRM researchers from a paradox perspective is how individual actors constitute such tensions (Putnam et al., 2016), and what this means in terms of developed responses (Jarzabkowski, Le, & Van de Ven, 2013). The role of power is crucial though not determinative, and the dynamics associated with this are worthy of study. As Figure 1 shows, our framework highlights the ever-present and dynamic nature of (latent) HRM tensions due to contradictory elements and how these become

salient at particular points in time. Tensions between employee/employer interests that relate for example to compensation policies, workforce differentiation strategies, HRM role divisions, or work-life balance regulations, can become salient due to factors such as plurality change, and scarcity as highlighted in current paradox theory (e.g., Smith & Lewis, 2011).

There are many examples in the HRM literature, although not based on paradox theorizing, that suggest increased plurality and knock-on effects for tensions and their management. *Plurality* derives from diversification of types of employees/groups in the workplace with different interests, preferences, terms and conditions of employment, formal employment relationships, etc. Technological changes and innovations (Meijerink, Bondarouk, & Lepak, 2013), rationalization and restructuring of HRM functions (Caldwell, 2003) and the growing prevalence of temporary and networked organizations (Bredin, 2008; Keegan, Huemann, & Turner, 2012; Swart & Kinnie, 2014) all increase plurality in terms of employees, line managers and contract workers. A paradox perspective on tensions in HRM would highlight how these are being perceived, constituted and handled by HRM practitioners and other actors including trade unions and employees themselves.

*Change* is endemic to HRM systems and is related to dynamism in institutional/legal arrangements regarding employees' rights and employers responsibilities; product market competition; introduction of new organizational strategies for competing; new models for the HRM function; new technologies and how these order and shape employment relationships and possibilities for employees to interact with the HRM function, etc. Boxall and Purcell (2016) hold that change causes tensions in terms of managements' goals for HRM systems and ways of managing these tensions.

Finally, *scarcity* is linked with contextual or internal developments including loose/tight product and labour markets; increasing/decreasing firm financial resources; fluctuations in labour supply/demand; changing societal norms regarding training and development of school-leavers; etc. As sustainability is one of the outcomes of managing human resources (Ehnert,

2009; Kramar, 2014), broader contextual environmental, social and human resource scarcities can be taken into account (e.g. dysfunctional educational systems). Our framework provides a starting point for in-depth and rich contextual analysis of latent tensions regarding performing, learning, belonging and organizing and how they become salient.

**(2) Perspectives on tensions.** Part 2 of the framework highlights that when tensions are rendered salient by different factors (see 1b) it impacts the experiences, cognitions, emotions, and actions of *different kinds of actors* (2a). Exactly what elements are contradictory, simultaneous, persistent and interrelated is linked to *context* (2b). The paradoxes of performing facing a small domestically operating firm may differ from those facing a globally operating organization (Chung et al., 2011; Evans & Doz, 1989). The belonging paradoxes a HR specialist faces in a context where trade unions are powerful and professional HRM training emphasizes parity in employment relationships may differ from those facing HR specialists in highly unitarist corporate systems and low levels of employment regulation. From a paradox perspective, HRM systems are inherently tenuous (Lewis, 2000). Simultaneous, paradoxical HRM elements are manifest in competing organizational discourses and HRM functions' distributions of tasks and priorities. However, regardless of how the policies and practices are developed to manage employment, this never completely resolves HRM tensions because contradictory and simultaneous elements inherent to the paradoxical relationship between employees and employers persist over time.

Our framework guides researchers to attend to HRM tensions from the perspectives of *a wide range of actors* (2a) - employees (different groups within and between organizations); lower level HRM specialists, line managers, trade unions, families, communities and society as well as high-level managers, and to incorporate *emotional, cognitive* and *behavioral* aspects in different spatial and temporal *domains*, including for example families of employees and the *long-term* consequences of paradoxes on individuals. It recognizes the presence of multiples as

enriching understanding of tensions, their sources, and influences in working through them (Putnam et al., 2016).

It is additionally complicated that the source of tensions can be both within and outside of organizations. For example, employees experience tensions at work that arise primarily in a non-work context but spill-over to the employment setting (Bolton & Houlihan, 2007). Awareness of the different perspectives on tensions of different involved actors, as well as the *domains* in which tensions can arise, is an important aspect of a Paradox HRM perspective on tensions.

In particular, the *emotional* aspects of coping with HRM tensions have tended to be overlooked to date in favor of a focus on improving performance outcomes by strategically (and cognitively) managing tensions (Ehnert, 2009). Performance paradoxes (multiple conflicting goals) or belonging paradoxes (identifying with ethical professional and transcendent humanistic values and business values, e.g., Pohler & Willness, 2014) can lead to HRM specialists struggling with what they perceive as absurd double binds in their daily work (Putnam, 1986). Their emotional reaction to tensions can affect the way they deal with employees and line managers and in turn how HR specialists deal with each other (Rynes, 2004).

**(3) Responses to tensions.** Responses to tensions between simultaneously contradictory elements can vary greatly from one actor to another (Lewis, 2000). Research suggests that individuals may accept, deny, ignore, embrace and accommodate paradoxical elements (Poole & Ven, 1989). Research also suggests that responses are influenced by the social, relational, managerial and discursive *context* (see 2b) (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Putnam, 1986). *Power* not only influences the creation of tensions, as employers in industrial capitalist societies usually have more power than employees (Godard, 2010) (2b), but it also plays a role in the “resolution” of or responses to tensions (Putnam, 1986; Putnam et al., 2016). However, employers cannot fully ignore employees’ interests and aims due to the indeterminacy of human labor as a

resource input to work processes (Watson, 2004); the volatility and scarcity of labour markets (Boxall & Purcell, 2016); and the unpredictable and creative potential of human beings to reflect on and shape their life-worlds, including their reactions to HRM systems (Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009).

When confronted with conflicting performance goals relating to their work and non-work domains, employees may cognitively construe work and non-work commitments as either/or dilemmas to avoid paralyzing emotions associated with perceived double binds relating to commitments to behave adequately in each domain. Either/or construal of performance paradoxes may result for example in voluntary turnover or overinvestment in work at the expense of family or leisure time which over time can lead to unsustainable health-related effects (Ehnert, 2009; Ehrnrooth & Björkman, 2012; Mariappanadar, 2014). Understanding how employees construe paradoxical tensions in organizations is an important issue that has not gained much attention in the current HRM literature (for an exception see Brandl & Bullinger, 2017) even though research indicates that some HRM systems, e.g. high performance work systems, confront employees with simultaneously maintaining ever higher performance levels *and* their own health-related well-being (Van De Voorde et al., 2012).

Paradox theory suggests that responses are partially shaped by context and how well it supports paradoxical thinking and responses. Organizational actors can be trained to approach tensions as both/and paradoxes (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). They can be enabled to accept and accommodate the absurdity of paradoxes in the form of mixed messages and contradictions (Putnam, 1986) in order to be able to work through them. However, actors can also be paralyzed by tensions in a context where open dialogue and feedback are not facilitated (Luscher, Lewis, & Ingram, 2006; Putnam, 1986). Research that explores what contextual factors shape HRM actors' responses to tensions can create valuable practical and theoretical insights. Our paradox HRM framework addresses the contextualized nature of paradoxes and guides researchers to

understand how actors respond to tensions, and what the outcomes are for those actors, their organizations, and the broader community and society.

**(4) Outcomes of responses to tensions.** Outcomes of responses to paradoxes depend on how well the context facilitates actors to work through tensions by maintaining a focus on elements as both/and paradoxes (Lewis, 2000; Putnam, 1986). Outcomes of constructing tensions as either/or dilemmas can include emotional anxiety, discomfort, ambiguity and inertia resulting in vicious cycles (4a). This occurs as problems do not get accepted (Poole & Ven, 1989; Vince & Broussine, 1996) or appear repeatedly; therefore adequate solutions, however provisional in the face of plurality, change, and scarcity, cannot be developed.

Paradox theory suggests that either/or responses can fuel reinforcing cycles, undermining sustainable solutions as actors respond to simultaneous opposing elements (e.g. pressure on HRM specialists to focus on employee needs and business needs) by choosing one or the other element (Jay, 2013). Both/and responses allowing acceptance and even transcendence of paradoxes fuel virtuous cycles (4b) of creativity, innovativeness, ambidexterity and sustainability (Lewis, 2000).

Current categorizations of outcomes include vicious cycles and virtuous cycles and their correspondence with individual and organizational characteristics spurring these (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Our framework guides HRM researchers to examine outcomes of responses to tensions at individual, interpersonal and organizational levels as well, considering how contextual factors enable and constrain acceptance or transcendence of paradoxes, or developments of both/and or more/than (temporary) responses (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Putnam et al., 2016).

#### **A worked example: Telework**

To illustrate how our framework can be used to guide Paradox HRM analysis, we provide a worked example of the case of telework (Taskin & Devos, 2005). Paradoxical HRM tensions (1a) between the organization and individual (i.e., interaction with co-employees vs. working

by oneself) as well as between autonomy and control (individual responsibility vs. value for the organization) are highlighted when telework is introduced as a change to work organization (1b) in a particular context (2b). Handling of such tensions from a paradox perspective means, first of all, that the HR function takes into account not only the importance of pressures for organizational objectives but also simultaneously questions that will arise for the quality of work life of teleworkers and possibly their families (2). In addition, a paradox perspective recognizes that the goals of implementing telework (e.g., increased personal autonomy, more flexible interaction with other colleagues) may have unanticipated negative consequences (e.g., work intensification, loss of commitment to the organization) and that these consequences may even undermine the achievement of the very goals at the heart of deciding to implement telework arrangements. This highlights the simultaneously contradictory and interrelated elements in telework arrangements that create performance paradoxes for teleworkers (work autonomously and flexibly and continue to share knowledge and coordinate with co-workers) and organizations (devolve responsibility and maintain control).

Viewing teleworking arrangements this way, it is possible to analyze the dynamics between various opposing poles of the paradoxes in play. Telework changes (1b) the interaction between co-workers, employees and their managers rendering latent organizing and performing tensions salient. What does the absence of direct interaction imply for the sharing of knowledge with others? How does autonomy over scheduling one's work affect the short-term and long-term results? How does the transfer of responsibility (and devolvement of risk to employees) influence the psychological contract (i.e., the company's relation with the employees and their retention)?

Because there are no straightforward answers to these questions, the very act of asking these questions may raise discomfort and anxiety (2a) for those who must make decisions including managers but also employees who are considering teleworking as an option. The posing of questions makes dynamic and complex relations apparent: the short-term gains in flexibility are



viewed differently in the light of increasing risk to employee well-being in the long run as a result of the added pressure that occurs when responsibility for workplace conditions (e.g., equipment, silence) required in order to accomplish work-related tasks are actually transferred to the employees. An appreciation of paradoxical tensions offers a possibility for constructive engagement with them and opportunities for more elaborate discussions to stay with and work through the paradox (4). What is avoided are simple assumptions regarding linear effects, one-size-fits-all permanently and win-win solutions.

Defensive responses to tensions in telework such as ignoring (3a) (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Poole & Ven, 1989; Smith & Lewis, 2011) may provide relief for a short time but can then potentially lead to vicious cycles (4a) because paradoxes have not adequately been dealt with. When paradoxes need to be addressed over and over again this can be costly in the long-term. In the example of teleworking arrangements, defensive responses to tensions could include ‘splitting’ (Poole & Ven, 1989) which refers to occasional telework (1-2 days per week) or agreements for a defined period after which the employee returns to the work site, i.e. spatial or temporal separation of the poles (Poole & Ven, 1989). Although this solution might seem favorable and produce minimal conflicts between employee work-life-balance and increased flexibility, this mode of coping reduces the possibility of tensions occurring and could be seen as an ‘avoidance tactic’ (Ehnert, 2009; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Such a response prevents actors wishing to explore telework and all its possibilities from finding solutions at higher levels (see also Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), including for example reconceptualizing actors’ perceptions of the paradox (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).

To achieve virtuous cycles in response to paradoxes (4b), active responses to tensions are needed that deal with paradox long-term (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). For example, ‘opposing’ is a coping mode, which keeps tensions continuously high and requires from actors that they continuously take contradictory poles into account and that they accept the tensions involved, or that they confront and work through the tensions actively. For teleworking, employers may

offer training in time management to work against the undermining of long-term productivity through work intensification at the home office. Co-workers may participate in performance assessments and space could be provided for social activities to emphasize the importance of interaction with other employees that is needed for knowledge transfer and commitment. Whatever resolutions actors develop as they work through these tensions, the concrete resolutions cannot be viewed as final. What matters more is “purposeful iterations between alternatives in order to ensure simultaneous attention to them over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 392).

### **Discussion and Avenues for Research**

Building on our framework, HRM tensions arise from elements that are opposing, simultaneous and persistent. A focus on persistent coexistence of opposing HRM elements can enable learning because it challenges academics and practitioners to stay with the paradox (Vince & Broussine, 1996: 4), which, as the telework example suggests, can promote organizational sustainability via HRM. Paradox HRM takes the viewpoint of employees and managers as human beings, as well as their families, communities and societies (Ehnert, 2009; Peters & Lam, 2015). Decisions regarding work conditions, compensation and development are all broadly relevant and highly impactful issues not only for employees but also for managers charged with implementing policies, communities, societies, and families who are affected by HRM systems (Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Ehnert, 2009; Janssens & Steyaert, 1999, 2009; Winstanley & Woodall, 2000).

Paradox theory is a powerful but currently under-utilized lens for studying HRM tensions and responses to tensions. As a metatheoretical perspective (Lewis & Smith, 2014), it can be combined with other theoretical lenses to conceptualize tensions and responses. Although currently rare in HRM research, examples of combining a paradox view with other “academic languages, concepts and practices” (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009: 152) include Kozica and Brandl (2015) using paradox theory and convention theory to study performance appraisal, and Ehnert

(2009) and Guerci and Carollo (2016) combining paradox theory and sustainability theories to study HRM systems. The potential for further development of HRM analysis of tensions based on paradox theory is significant in our view.

Paradoxical tensions cannot be resolved or avoided, nor do they inevitably lead to vicious cycles. Tensions may become a source for creativity and sustainability as well as individual and organizational development. It is vital for HRM theorizing to move beyond the conceptualization of tensions as static configurations of opposing elements (e.g., cost-effectiveness vs. social legitimacy) and adopt alternative perspectives on tensions that involve multiple actors' concerns, contexts and power (Figure 1). HRM actors do not only need to balance dualities (Evans, 1999), but cope with dynamically evolving and interrelated tensions. Developing paradox handling capacities of all actors in organizations to continuously cope with the emotional and cognitive demands is important. Consequently, a consideration of the presence of multiples (Putnam et al., 2016) in terms of HRM tensions, and incorporation of trade unions and employees in constituting tensions and developing responses, could support a more dynamic and inclusive orientation to research on HRM tensions in the employment relationship.

However, we also explicitly advocate a focus on concrete handling strategies. The proposals forwarded in mainstream HRM research tend to offer little practical guidance for HRM actors regarding tensions. Neither abstract prescriptions for “optimal alignment” or “multiple simultaneous fits” provide guidance to HRM practitioners and other actors on what this means on a daily basis. It is unclear if this requires a change in mindset, different negotiation skills, or a particular emotional or cognitive capacity for coping with paradoxical tensions. Critical HRM writers have been more explicit about the sources of instability in HRM solutions to tensions, but the emancipatory ideals of critical HRM writing also mean HRM actors are not given guidance on practical aspects of responding to and working through tensions as continuously evolving aspects of their working lives. Our aim in this chapter has been to

advance a framework that guides the systematic study of HRM tensions, responses to tensions and the consequences of these responses. A paradox perspective is useful to this end because it

“intentionally introduces contradictions that exist simultaneously to discussion, thereby initially prompting a degree of confusion and feelings of anxiety to stimulate creative thinking that moves beyond either—or toward both—and understandings” (Lewis & Dehler, 2000: 708).

### **Future Research on HRM from a Paradox Perspective**

Our Paradox framework and perspective on conceptualizing the multi-dimensional and changing nature of HRM tensions draws on a systems view of organizations and we are aware that there are different possibilities for understanding organizational processes, individuals and HRM processes than a paradox perspective. Notwithstanding, a Paradox HRM perspective does suggest a number of valuable avenues for future research. It is a useful starting point for a more fine-grained examination of tensions involved in achieving sustainable employment relationships and supports a renewed look at the fundamental question of what it means for HR specialists to be ‘strategic’. Encouraging line managers with shorter-term and specific objectives to also focus on long term skill patterns and employee commitment levels is a theme that can be supported by a paradox perspective on HRM. This involves actively managing the likely resulting tensions between specialists and line managers that arise from such questions. A paradox perspectives means we also need to consider employees as agents with their own desires, needs, and motivations, as well as capacities for pursuing them (e.g., Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009).

Watson’s suggestion (2012: 486-7) to constantly monitor and influence comparative treatment of employees across the organization with the aim of achieving a degree of perceived fairness of treatment may be an important pillar to prevent the organization from vicious cycles of social disintegration and crises. While viewing employees as agents with their own desires, concerns and motivations as well as capacities for pursuing them (e.g., Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009) is important, we also believe that HRM actors could more

systematically explore how stakeholders to the employment relationship, like families and labor representatives, influence the processes through which employees are working through tensions.

Our framework highlights how both employees and employers use HRM to achieve their goals, as well as the tensions they and others encounter. However, we believe that the paradoxical nature of HRM highlighted in our framework also offers input for researchers in the domain of paradox theory. For example, HRM topics could inspire paradox researchers to enrich the types of paradoxes they study in work organizations, to sharpen the focus on sources for paradoxes including inequalities in power and voice, and to examine the role of emotions more systematically when studying paradoxes.

A focus on the employment relationship may help paradox researchers to further elaborate on paradoxes operating in organizational settings. For example, employment relationships generally involve the competing demands on HR actors to be both controlling and caring (Caldwell, 2003), producing tensions that cannot be handled by abandoning one of these requirements (Watson, 2012: 492). The analysis of requirements for HR actors for building both positive relations and conflicts with trade unions to secure their influence (Brandl & Pohler, 2010) offers insights to identify how actors handle ambivalent relationships towards each other. Similarly the extensive literature on tensions HR actors experience in terms of their responsibilities (e.g., Colling & Ferner, 1992; Link & Müller, 2015) could provide inspiration to researchers examining the processes whereby organizing paradoxes operate in organizations. And lastly, HRM may be a fruitful field for paradox researchers to study how actors ensure that formal processes (e.g., certificates), increasingly pervading contemporary organizations with the promise to *support* their work, do not *distract* them from their ‘actual’ work (Watson, 2012: 492).

With regards to sharpening the focus on sources of tensions, literature that considers the socio-economic context in which HRM operates might inspire paradox researchers to further explore

the root causes of contradictory elements in organizations. Watson and Watson's study in a UK university setting highlights tensions that arise between different actors and their roots in deeper societal problems giving rise to such tensions (Watson & Watson, 1999; see also Watson, 1986). Their work points out that the practical tensions, which managers face in their day-to-day work, are rooted in conflicting relations between basic societal principles. In industrial capitalist societies, these principles are control vs. freedom/autonomy. The tension between them is enduring since the principles are embedded in the institutions of formally free labour, employment (i.e. selling capacity to work to others) and rational organization (Watson, 2012; Watson & Watson, 1999). Different institutions may play a role in sustaining the tensions that paradox scholars have identified, e.g., organizing, learning and performing, and HRM research has the potential to greatly enhance our understanding of these issues.

Research looking at the perception of tensions by actors through studying their emotions is also highly valuable. The emotional implications of tensions are a vital though largely untapped source of information on how organizations in the aggregate, and their individual members, cope with tensions. Thanks to the interest of HRM scholars in vicious cycles, the HR literature offers a rich empirical setting for studying individual crises (Brandl & Bullinger, 2017; Frost, 1989; Steers, 2008) which provides a useful starting point for capturing the circumstances under which tensions become manifest and with what effects on individual outcomes. Research on identity work within the interpretative and critical research tradition (e.g., Brandl & Bullinger, 2017; Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014) could reveal more fine-grained insights on the individual responses to competing elements. These individual responses not only have implications for understanding organizational outcomes, but may also generate advice for practitioners for developing coping strategies.

## **Conclusion**

Tensions and paradoxes are of major relevance for HRM practice. In this chapter, we began by identifying traditional sources and coping strategies of HRM tensions. We then proposed

studying HRM tensions via a new paradox framework aimed at making HRM theory more relevant for practice. With our framework, we wish to stimulate research on the conditions of rendering latent HRM tensions salient and on exploring the interrelatedness of HRM tensions. We also suggest that this framework can inform research on the multiple perspectives of HRM actors on tensions and their contextual influences, as well as the different responses and combinations of responses to tensions on both individual and collective levels and the dynamic outcomes of the responses to tensions.

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FIGURE 1

